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THE CHARACTER OF CHINESE FOLK-TALES.

IF we were to create a nation having the evolution of a distinctive folk-lore as its main reason for being, we should make that nation vast, that the wisdom of a multitude and the wit of some inspired fool might combine in the production of each story. We should make that nation old, so that during ages the work of natural selection could have gone on, and stories fit for human nature's daily use might have proved their fitness by their survival. We should isolate our nation, so that its lore should be indigenous, expressing the character of its folk, and true to the type of mind from which it emanated. And we should have the masses in our nation unlearned, because undisciplined intellect is the mother, the preserver, and the devotee of myth.

All these conditions are found perfect in a nation ready-made for our study. China has four hundred millions of people, and has had four thousand years of existence, in which it was shut off from the rest of the world by boundless oceans, impassable mountains, terrible deserts, and the rigid bars of its own gates. The stress and struggle of life within it have been such as to develop a high order of native acumen, while education has been so uncommon as to make reading an exceptional accomplishment. It therefore constitutes an ideal field for the folk-lorist, but only its borders have as yet been explored.

The obstacles in the way of its exploration by a foreigner will probably long remain such as they now are; first, a diversity of formidable dialects, which must be mastered before anything so utterly vernacular as are folk-stories can be well understood; secondly, such difference in customs that long explanations are often necessary to an apprehending of the situations; and thirdly, the inaccessibility of the richest repositories of folk-lore, the inner apartments of the household, the women's domicile.

Moreover, there is such dissimilarity between oriental and occidental modes of thought that the Aryan translator needs to undergo a sort of atavism, reverting toward his remote Turanian forbears, before he can perceive the actual significance of their narratives. He must indeed have learned to do what the Chinese themselves prescribe, "Draw nutriment out of the same soil, and refreshment from the same water-supply," before he can really assimilate or truly reproduce their ideas. Even then, he whose training has always demanded disbelief in the unproven will experience perpetual surprise in his mental communings with those to whom such products of the imagination as Will-o'-the-Wisp and the Man-in-the-Moon are

veritable personages. Absolute submergence of this intellectual incompatibility is essential to the flow of those common human sympathies which bring the best folk-stories into the current of conversation. That being accomplished, many precious bits of jetsam prove the kinship of the Mongolians with the rest of mankind. I never felt so much at home in China as when in some hamlet that foreign influence had never touched I watched the children playing cat's-cradle, forming on their little chrome-yellow fingers the very shapes that my string used to take when I was a child in New York ; or when they squatted on the ground and played jackstones, just as do American boys. Even the aboriginal savages in their mountain fastnesses seemed less alien, after I knew of their jocund dance around the May-pole, in the manner of our Saxon forefathers.

When I began to gather the stories which have been lately printed in "Chinese Nights' Entertainment," my object was solely that of acquiring the colloquial speech of the Swatow Chinese. I soon found that their stories were innumerable, and were singular revelations of the native mind. Then when I got a clue to one, I managed to have the teller repeat it to me alone, while I rapidly wrote it down in romanized Chinese, preserving thus not only the sense but the sentences. When I afterward decided to select some of these stories for translation into English, only a small proportion of them were available. Those based wholly on Mongolian usages could not be transposed without demolition. This becomes plain if we reverse the process, and consider the difficulty in translating our beautiful and beloved story of Cinderella into the language of a people who never go to balls, nor dance ; or of setting the sweet old romance of the Sleeping Beauty before those who deem it utterly improper for a prince or any other man to admire any woman beside the one who has been early provided for him by his orderly parents. Romantic affection has no place in the Chinese scheme of life, and their folklore is poverty-stricken in spirit because of this deficiency.

They have, however, other resources in abundance. To the mind imbued from infancy with a belief in gods whose demoniacal spirits can at will roam away from, or abide within, their wooden bodies, such stories as the following have a living interest. This one was told to me within a stone's-throw of just such a shrine as is mentioned, and is about

AN UNLUCKY DEMON.

There was a fine large temple beside a much travelled road. The idol in this temple received numerous offerings, and had an abundance of food and clothing, with elegant equipage of every sort.

A hill rose behind the temple, and on the hilltop was a little shrine where dwelt the idols called the White Mandarin and his

Wife. The goddess found much fault with her spouse because their shrine was neglected. She averred that their ill condition resulted from his stupidity, and she advised him to go to the prosperous god at the foot of the hill, and learn from him the art of becoming rich.

Impelled by his wife's discontent, the poor demon went down the hill to learn from his rich neighbor the secret of success. The grand idol received him affably, and responded kindly to his inquiries, saying, "I have a lasso which I throw over the heads of people, and draw tightly as they pass by. Their heads then ache, they try to remember where they were when their illness began, and they soon return here bringing offerings with which to propitiate me. Thereupon I release them from the lasso, and then they become well, and afterward bring more offerings, expressive of their gratitude to me for their recovery. Thus I become famous, and have the reputation of being powerful. Now, I will lend you my lasso, and you can so use it as to become as wealthy as I."

The poor demon took the lasso with many expressions of gratitude, and returned to his abode. A lad, who was going out to gather edible snails, soon passed the shrine, and the demon lassoed him. His head thereupon began to ache so badly that he turned about and went homeward, and the demon followed him, holding on to the borrowed lasso, of which he dared not lose sight. The lad, having arrived at home, told his mother that his head ached too severely to permit his stooping down to gather snails, and she at once began to berate him for being a lazy, unprofitable child, pretending illness that he might avoid work. Growing angrier while she scolded, she took a stick to beat the boy, and this so frightened the demon for the safety of his lasso that he caught it away, and ran home with all speed. As soon as the lasso was removed, the lad's head ceased to ache, and no offerings were brought by either mother or son to the shrine of the White Mandarin.

The poor demon was fearful that some injury to the lasso would oblige him to make recompense for it to his powerful neighbor, so he took it to its owner, and told him of the ill success in its use. The great idol called him a dunce for lassoing such poor game as an empty-handed snail-gatherer, and told him to keep the lasso a while longer, and to try it upon some one who had an abundance of goods.

Soon after, the demon saw a man carrying a big load, and, thinking that he fulfilled the prescribed conditions, lassoed him in haste. He was a bucket-mender, carrying an immense bundle of hoops, and could not rightly be termed empty-handed. The man's head began to ache, but, being poor, he felt that he could not stop work, and he went on to the next village, where he sat down to ply his trade. The demon drew his lasso tighter, and the man's head ached harder,

till he became angry, and seizing his hatchet he swung it around his head, exclaiming, "Well, if my plaguey head is going to split, then I'll split it myself." Alarmed for the safety of the lasso, the demon snatched it off and ran away. So the man got better and the shrine got no offering.

Then the demon went again to his friend, and was derided for having taken a poor laborer in his toils. He was told that he should snare a rich man, who would be able to nurse his ailment, and to make fine compensation for his cure. So the next time the demon threw the lasso he ensnared a handsomely dressed traveller, and followed him to his house, drawing the rope gradually tighter and increasing the resulting headache. If the rich man had consulted a soothsayer or a spirit-medium, as many persons do when ill, he would have been advised to bear propitiatory offerings to the god near whose shrine he was when the headache began. But he did no such thing. He called a physician, who prescribed an infusion of old camphor-wood. The rich man said that new camphor-wood might easily be obtained, for there were plenty of chips at the idol-makers'; but old camphor-wood was difficult to get. "Oh," said one of the farm-hands, who stood near, "I know where you can get some that is very old. There is an ancient idol in the little shrine of the White Mandarin on the top of the hill behind the great temple. I will go and get the image to be chopped up and steeped for you." The poor demon, hearing all this, and knowing that the old wood referred to was his own body, loosened the lasso, and hurried home. The aching head then got better, and the old camphor-wood was not sought; but the poor demon returned the lasso to his neighbor, saying, "Here is your lasso; you told me to snare a rich man in it, and I did so; the result was that I came near being myself destroyed."

I suppose that the preservation of this story among Chinese folk is due to its moral, which is the same as in many other of their tales, and is, that efficiency depends, not on the possession of power, but on art in using it. Many Chinese folk-stories have a *motif* so repulsive as to make their translation inexpedient. Others are simply and frankly sordid, as is the following:—

THE OBEDIENT PYTHON.

The young daughter of a woodman found in a mountain glen an egg, which she held in her hand till it hatched, and a little serpent came out. She fed the snake and it became her fast friend and constant playmate. Knowing that it would be killed if seen by her parents, she never betrayed its existence, and always went alone to

the grotto where it lived. While her mother was busy at the loom, and her father away in the forest, she and her little companion took their meals together, raced in the fields, climbed trees seeking fruit, and were as merry as the summer day was long.

But the girl was suddenly betrothed to a man in the distant city, and she knew she could neither carry the snake to her future home nor find a habitation for it there. She told the snake all her trouble, and the snake grew sad and moped, till she took leave of it to go to her husband's house on her bridal day, when it turned toward the mountains and sped out of sight.

Several years passed, and then the girl in her city home heard that an enormous python was ravaging the hamlets round. Animals and men came to their death in its coils, and its name was a terror throughout the countryside. So frequent and terrible were its visitations that the district magistrate offered a great reward to any one who would destroy or drive it away. The placard announcing the reward gave a minute description of the python, with all its spots and marks, and the young woman recognized it as her former comrade. She sent notice to the magistrate that she would alone undertake the expulsion of the python, and then she went to its lair in the glen where it was hatched. The python welcomed her, listened to her entreaties, evinced a desire that she might gain the promised reward, took affectionate leave of her, went away into the depths of the mountains, and was never heard of more.

Of the countless animals appearing in Chinese folk-lore, possibly the fox makes most frequent entrance, but in my own compilation I omitted all fox-stories, because my friend Mr. Giles had published so many of these in his "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio." Next after, if not oftener than the fox, the dragon prominently figures. One of the pictures everywhere exhibited in shops is that of the wedding procession of the son of the Sea-Dragon-King. The story, seriously believed by the folk, is that once in a great storm a fisherman's boat was upset, and he sank safely to the bottom of the sea, and there found himself in the midst of the festivities accompanying the marriage of the son of the Eastern Dragon to the daughter of the Western Dragon. The fisherman, by making verses appropriate to the occasion, proved his fitness for the place of an honored guest in the palace, and was invited to stay and see the marriage procession, and to partake of the wedding supper. He afterward returned to upper land, and told his tale, which has been handed down from ancient times. His stanzas introduce all known denizens of the deep as participants in the affair: the little fish scurrying about on errands, the turtles chanting ballads, the scallop

acting as go-between, and the oyster as staid mistress of ceremonies.

A shorter narrative, manifestly suggested by the former one, is adapted to inland hearers, and is called the "Marriage of the Carp." It runs in this wise, the order of a human marriage procession being kept by the animals.

thi o: lăi sŭn pō,	Come view the fields ; the sky is gray ;
lĭ-hŭ tó chua bô.	The carp brings home a wife to-day.
ho-sŭn pun tih-ti ;	The horn is sounded by the fly,
sua"-mang khĩa chai-kí ;	The minnow lifts the flag on high,
sŏng-hŭ khù khĩa sêng ;	The lizard holds the banyan twig ;
hê"-pô khĩa kau-teng ;	The crayfish brings the lanterns big,
liu-sio kng sin-nĕ,	Mudfishes bear the sedan-chair,
he-ko tek lăng-siê" ;	Crabs fetch the boxes red and square ;
cúi-kói tà" pō-tô ;	Frogs lug the bags in colors gay,
chăng-hôi lăi siê-hô.	The snail <i>kowtows</i> in formal way.

A curious pathos is often manifest in Chinese folk-stories, but I have to confess that the narrators usually appear to be unconscious of it. To one who knows how dreary, oppressed, and homesick a Chinese girl is during the first years of her married life, the pearl in the following story is like the little green plant that grew in the prison in "Picciola." It was told me by a charming young woman, whom I might almost have believed to be its heroine, had she not said she heard it from her grandmother, a native of a mountainous farming district in the Kuangtung Province.

THE PEARL LANTERN.

A little girl, playing in the wood near her father's cottage, found a small gray egg, which she kept and cared for. After a while a lizard hatched out from it, and was reared by the child, who, fearing harm from others to her pet, kept it concealed among the rocks. It shared her food, and was her sole companion in her sports. It grew large, rugged, and ugly, while she grew tall, fair, and winsome ; but the two were close friends, and understood all each other's modes of speech.

When the time came for the maiden to be wedded, her chief trouble was in planning for its secret conveyance to her future home. She knew that the loving, hideous creature, that she never dared introduce into her mother's house, could have no welcome among the strangers whom she must henceforth serve in the capacity of daughter-in-law, and that she might not be able to find healthful lodging for her pet near her new domicile. She explained to the lizard all the difficulties that she was powerless to avoid, told it her grief should she be separated from it, and asked it whether it would go

with her to an untried life, in unknown surroundings. Then the lizard, at her invitation, curled itself into a little basket, which she took with her in the sedan-chair that carried her to her husband's house, and there she deposited it in a drain that offered the only place of concealment near her abode. There she fed it daily from her own portion, and talked to it in moments of leisure.

But her mother-in-law finally saw that she furtively pocketed bits of food, watched to see what she did with them, and discovered her feeding the lizard in its refuge. No appeal would induce the mother-in-law to permit the reptile to be harbored about the house, and the poor girl was obliged to tell it that its life was in danger unless it fled. The lizard appeared to understand, and as she bent down to stroke it, it shed a shining tear which became a pearl in her hand, and then it turned away toward the distant woods and disappeared. The pearl ever after shone with such brilliancy whenever she carried it in her hand, that she never needed any other lamp after dark.

Adele M. Fielde.